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Sucker's Progress: An Informal History of Gambling in America

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[This article prints out to about eight pages.] **book review**

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By Herbert Asbury. (1938/2003). New York: Thunder Mouth Press, ISBN 1-56025-495-5 (paperback). Price (approx.): $26.50 CND or $15.95 USD.

Imagine a comprehensive book on the history of gambling in the United States that never mentions Las Vegas and says very little about slot machines. From our modern perspective such a thing would seem unlikely or incomplete. *Sucker's Progress*, by Herbert Asbury (1891-1963), is indeed a comprehensive book on the history of gambling in America. It never mentions Las Vegas, because it covers the period from 1700 to 1910 (approximately), a period of history during which New York, Washington, New Orleans, Cincinnati, Chicago, and San Francisco were the gambling havens, rather than Las Vegas and Atlantic City.

Asbury was a prolific journalist who set out on a mission to document the entire

underworld of America. He recently achieved considerable fame because his book, *Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld* (variously cited as published 1927 or 1928) became the basis of a major motion picture by the same name. Asbury's *Sucker's Progress* is a fascinating and detailed history of gambling in America. This book is particularly interesting because of its age: it was first published in 1938. Anyone who believes that gambling is a recent phenomenon, or that the social consequences of gambling were somehow invented by the electronic gambling machine, ought to read this book. Our modern era does not appear to be the first age of wide-open gambling availability, but merely a replay of earlier eras.

The book is divided into two parts. The chapters of the first part focus on the games that people played. He discusses the origins of several popular games including craps, lottery, poker, policy (a numbers racket) and faro (a card game). Smaller sections are devoted to monte (cards), chuck a luck (dice), keno, three-card-monte, and bunco (cards or dice). The chapters of the second part of the book focus on different regions and time periods, such as the “splendid hells” of New York and other eastern cities, the Mississippi River steam boats, the saloons of the Wild West, and New York City in the 1890s. Throughout the book Asbury gives numerous accounts of the lives of casino owners, card sharpers, and corrupt politicians. Longer vignettes are provided on the careers of people such as Mike Macdonald, who coined the phrase, “There is a sucker born every minute”; John Morrissey, a pioneer of boxing in America, who went on to built a casino and raceway at Saratoga Springs; and Richard Canfield, who dominated the New York gambling scene in the 1890s. Each section roughly follows a chronological order, except for specific vignettes about historical characters.

Asbury makes numerous mentions of the social evil of gambling, such as the exploitation of the poor. In 1834, Philip Hone in his diary described the lottery “the most ruinous and disgraceful system of gambling to which our citizens have been exposed” (as cited by Asbury, 1938, p. 86). In addition, referring to the Louisiana Lottery, Asbury writes, “Throughout its existence, the Lottery aroused great opposition in Louisiana, partly because of its pernicious effects upon the poor, and partly because of the flagrant misuse of the great political power it possessed” (p. 86). It seems that some things do not change.

Professional gamblers, suckers, and other slang terms

The focus of the book is not on the pathology of gambling, but on the cheats that preyed upon the unsuspecting ordinary game player. In the book the terms “gambler” and “professional gambler” refer to people who made their living running games of chance such as faro or operating casinos. These gamblers often did not play the game; they “banked” the game. That is, they ran the game in much the

same way that a casino runs a game of blackjack today. According to Asbury, most of these “gamblers” ran their games in a manner intended to cheat the players out of their money as fast as possible; however, some dealt “square” or honest games (see below in the section on cheating). Asbury does not generally use the term gambler to refer to a person with a gambling problem. It is particularly interesting how the term “gambler” has evolved from meaning the person running the game (the house), to meaning the player or even on occasion the problem player (e.g., the 1974 movie *The Gambler* starring James Caan was about a pathological gambler).

Some of the professional gamblers discussed in the book were also pathological gamblers. For example, Canada Bill, a famous riverboat gambler, consistently won money by banking a game of three-card-monte, but consistently lost it playing faro. Once while he was playing faro, a friend told him that the game was rigged. However, Canada Bill kept playing anyway, explaining to his friend that it was the only game available. Many of the gamblers described in the book squandered their ill “gotten gains” away in one way or another, but most do not appear to have suffered from a gambling pathology.

Asbury introduces the reader to a rich language of gambling slang. A “sharp” or “sharper” was a gambler who cheated. According to Asbury, most professional gamblers cheated. A “sporting man” or “sportsman” was another term for a professional gambler, but this term also appeared to refer to the regular customers of casinos and gambling dens as well as the professionals. “Gaming” is sometimes used as a synonym for gambling, indicating that the use of this term is not a recent invention of the gambling industry. A “sucker,” as used in the book, refers to the regular gamblers who play the games. In some cases this term is applied to pathological gamblers, but more often is used to refer to rich plantation owners and naïve country folk looking for a nice diversion or a quick buck. Interestingly, Asbury cites sources that use the term “addicts” to describe excessive gamblers as far back as the mid 19th century.

There were also a number of terms used to describe different sorts of gambling venues. The best casinos were called “splendid hells” or “first class” palatial gambling resorts. Many were lavishly furnished. Fine dining and cigars were offered to the patrons at no charge. A “skinning house,” in contrast, was a casino designed to take a player's money away from him as fast as possible. A “wolf trap” was a low-class casino where the banking was not done by the casino, but by anyone who was willing to set up a game of faro. This type of gambling den came into existence in Cincinnati around 1835 and offered games in a manner similar to the pool halls and bowling alleys of today. That is, the house provided the equipment, but the players had to organize and bank their own games. Most games in a wolf trap were “square,” because cheating in these rough casinos was

dangerous.

Cheating

Famous New York casino owner and gambler Richard Canfield insisted that he did not need to cheat in order to make a profit (p. 420). However the impression one gets reading this book is that Canfield's honesty was the exception, rather than the norm. The book outlines numerous ways in which games of chance were rigged to provide the professional gambler with a certain win over the suckers. Games like faro, craps, or poker were sometimes played as legitimate games of chance, but according to Asbury were more often rigged by the professional gamblers to provide them with a large advantage. Loaded dice, marked cards, vests with “holdouts” to hide good cards, strippers to cut off small strips from sides of cards, poker rings for marking cards, rigged faro boxes, and other “advantage tools” were openly marketed. One advertisement directed towards professional sharpers includes the line, “Some gamblers seem to forget, or never to have known, that there is only one way to gamble successfully, and that is to 'get Tools to gamble with'” (p. 70).

A “square deal” was a game that was played honestly. This phrase owes it origin to the practice of “stripping” off the edges of the cards to help the dealer identify the cards in order to cheat the players. The cards in a stripped deck would not line up to make a proper squared edge.

Asbury's focus on the cheats might be exaggerated. He describes bunco, for example, as being “entirely in the hands of sharpers” and was “never used for any other purpose than the despoliation of suckers” (p. 56). Bunco in fact became so synonymous with cheating that a police fraud squad is often called the bunco squad in honour of that game's fine reputation. However, bunco was a legitimate dice game that was quite popular in the 18th century and is apparently making a bit of a comeback today as a social and family entertainment (http://www.worldbunco.com/history.html).

Moral panic

Many of the quotes in the book draw a strong link between crime and gambling. Some of Asbury's sources seem to be in the grip of a “moral panic.” In a moral panic (Cohen, 2002) an amusement, such as comic books, video games, or rock music, to name three recent examples, becomes strongly associated in the media and public mind with crime or evil. The degree of moral panic over gambling is shown by the following quote:

> By the early 1830's the most startling rumors were current everywhere

> in that vast territory—the gamblers were rioting in New Orleans, stealing children and forcing them into brothels; they were agents of the Northern abolitionists; they had burned Mobile, pillaged Natchez, driven all but their own kind out of Vicksburg, and massacred the passengers of a dozen steamboats. The ignorant attributed to the power of the gamblers such acts of God as floods, tornadoes, cyclones, and even the great earthquake which had rocked the Mississippi Valley in 1811. (p. 213)

This panic ultimately led to the banning of public lotteries, anti-gambling riots, and in some cases the lynching of gamblers. Asbury's book itself is not an example of moral panic, but a collection of stories and anecdotes taken from articles and books written about gambling. Asbury certainly draws strong links between gambling, cheating, and crime, but at times his attitude towards his subject is one of bemused admiration for the accomplishments of these gamblers. Some of his sources, however, were caught up in moral panics, and these might give an exaggerated account of problems such as cheating.

The third wave of gambling

It is interesting to note that if such widespread cheating existed there must have been a lot of money to be made, a lot of suckers to milk who were either naïve or, perhaps, problem gamblers. One is left to wonder how a gambling industry so full of cheats could sustain itself. But the fact is that it did not sustain itself. The history, as told by Asbury, appears to be one of a constant shift from legitimate games, to cheating, to a legal ban or anti-gambling riot, followed later by a repeal of the anti-gambling laws as people forget why it was banned in the first place and so on through a continuous cycle.

In *Gambling and the Law*, Rose (1986) describes the current rapid expansion of legalized gambling as the “third wave of gambling.” Asbury's book is about the first (1800 to 1835, approximately) and second (1865 to 1900, approximately) waves of gambling. However, these waves appear to have been more like a series of cresting tides in different areas at different times. Unlike the current wave of legalized gambling, these older waves were often not legal and in no sense organized or coherent. Asbury describes these waves as follows,

> Gambling in America experienced its greatest growth and expansion during the half-century which followed the Louisiana Purchase. In addition to the evolution of Faro and Poker, the introduction of Craps, Thimble-Rig and Monte, and the Phoenix-like rise of Policy from the ashes of Lottery, this period saw the spread of public gaming throughout the country, the first organized anti-gambling crusades, the

> rise and fall of the picturesque sharper of the Western rivers, the citizen's war against the gamblers of the Mississippi, and the development of the gambling house and its transformation from a tolerated rarity into a political and social menace. (p.109)

The relationship between gambling and the law as described by Asbury has been a stormy one. Wide-open gambling existed in New Orleans during the French regime. Gambling bans in 1811, 1820, and 1835 sent ripples of displaced professional gamblers out across the Mississippi and throughout the interior of the United States.

The chapter on lotteries is in particular full of references to a love-hate relationship between the law and lotteries. Numerous schools, libraries, and other public institutions were funded through proceeds from lotteries. However, of particular interest is the large number of occasions on which various gambling activities have been prohibited by law. Lotteries were at one time legal and encouraged, but after lotteries were banned, policy (the numbers racket), faro, poker, and other games came to fill their place. Casinos were banned several times in history.

Between these prohibitions, various splendid hells as well as “second-rate skinning houses” would pop up from time to time. When gambling was legal they would pay licence fees, but when gambling was illegal they stayed open by paying off the police. These payoffs were essentially a licence fee. The New York police department, for example, used a well-defined formula to determine the size of the graft that a casino would have to pay based on the size of the casino. But in most cities the casinos' existence was always tenuous, as the police might attack at any time if the “graft” was insufficient or if some new reform-minded politician came into power.

Many cities had anti-gambling riots that ended in lynching. The lynching of gamblers in Vicksburg, for example (pg. 220), sent shocked waves of professional gamblers streaming north, west, and east, where they established “gambling colonies” in other cities. So gambling expanded and contracted in an almost accordion-like manner.

Interestingly, the gambling industry did not necessarily want wide-open gambling. In 1869 gambling was legalized in New Orleans, but a law permitting wide-open gambling was quickly repealed. It was the established gambling industry of the city that led the anti-gambling movement, because these “deluded sharpers” (p. 416) did not like the intense competition that the legalization had brought.

Noticeably absent from the book are discussions of betting on horse races, dog races, and sports. Asbury only mentions racetrack betting when casino operators or their biggest customers also branched out to the tracks. Perhaps this is because

Asbury was only interested in gambling and criminal operations, whereas the tracks were legal. In addition, I have found only one brief mention of slot machines (in a footnote), even though they were invented by Charles Fey in 1895. Presumably slots had not made much of an inroad into underworld gambling by 1938.

Sucker's Progress is a fascinating book for anyone interested in the history of gambling. It is particularly valuable for the insight it provides regarding the similarities and differences in the gambling scene across different time periods.

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